

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

11 November 2021

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Burrell, S.R. (2021) 'Cause We're All Just Part of the System Really': Complicity and Resistance in Young Sportsmen's Responses to Violence Against Women Prevention Campaigns in England.', *Sociological Research Online* . pp. 1-19.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804211049463>

Publisher's copyright statement:

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

‘Cause We’re All Just Part of the System Really’: Complicity and Resistance in Young Sportsmen’s Responses to Violence Against Women Prevention Campaigns in England

Sociological Research Online

1–19

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/13607804211049463

journals.sagepub.com/home/sro**Stephen R Burrell** 

Durham University, UK

Abstract

In recent years, initiatives to prevent men’s violence against women on university campuses in England have been growing. However, there remains a lack of institutional recognition about the gendered dynamics of this abuse and the importance of engaging men in ending it. This research sought to shed light on how young men make sense of violence prevention campaigns, through eight focus groups with 45 members of men’s university sports teams. The focus groups illustrated the need for prevention work to expand men’s critical consciousness of complicity in violence against women, to encourage them to reflect on both their personal connections to the problem and the positive role they can play in preventing it. This complicity was at times exhibited within the focus groups themselves, such as in defensive responses when patriarchal privileges and norms were brought into question. These included shifting the focus away from men’s violence and onto men’s victimisation, naturalisations of partner violence as an inevitability, and disassociating from the problem as if it was separate from the participants’ lives. Collective masculine norms appeared to play a substantial role in shaping the discussions, illustrating how these can mediate young men’s responses to prevention campaigns. However, at times the participants did challenge sexism among one another and articulate resistance to men’s violence against women, demonstrating their capacity to create change. The article contends that violence prevention requires critically addressing men’s practices and what Hearn calls the ‘hegemony of men’ more broadly, rather than only problematising specific ‘forms’ of masculinities.

Keywords

engaging men and boys, intimate partner violence, masculinities, prevention campaigns, university sport, violence against women

Corresponding author:

Stephen R Burrell, Department of Sociology, Durham University, 29 Old Elvet, Durham DH1 3HN, UK.

Email: s.r.burrell@durham.ac.uk

Introduction

There is increasing attention towards engaging with men and boys in order to prevent men's violence against women (Burrell, 2018). Evidence is growing about effective practice, such as the importance of gender-transformative approaches which actively work to shift masculine norms, and the need to instigate change holistically, across multiple levels of a community or organisation and not only among individuals, for it to be sustainable (Casey et al., 2018; Flood, 2019). Yet, we still have much to learn about the process of how meaningful transformations can be brought about in the perspectives and practices of men and boys, including how they themselves view violence prevention initiatives. This article draws on research which sought to provide new insights in this regard, through the lenses of young sportsmen's responses to violence against women prevention campaigns, which highlighted both complicity with and resistance to that violence.

In England, higher education is one context in which violence prevention efforts have been developing in recent years. Since the National Union of Students (NUS, 2010) published its 'Hidden Marks' report indicating that one in seven women experienced a 'serious physical or sexual assault' during their time at university, campaigning from students and staff has pushed universities to do more to tackle these issues. This has led to prevention work such as consent workshops and bystander intervention programmes (e.g. the Intervention Initiative; Fenton and Mott, 2018) being implemented at many universities.

Another NUS report by Phipps and Young (2013) shone a light on the gendered dynamics of university cultures underpinning the prevalence of violence, harassment, and abuse towards women on campus. Notions of 'lad culture' have entered public debates, pointing to the role that influential masculine norms play in perpetuating sexism and misogyny, as well as other harmful behaviours such as homophobia, at universities (Phipps, 2017). As a result, some anti-violence work has focused specifically on engaging men on campus in creating change, such as workshops by the organisation Beyond Equality. However, despite the attention towards 'lad culture', there has been reluctance from institutions to address the gendered roots of the problem (Burrell, 2018). For instance, universities have typically limited their focus to sexual violence, rather than connecting this with other forms of gender-based violence on campus, such as intimate partner abuse.

Universities UK (2016), the national representative body for higher education institutions, initiated a taskforce in 2015 'examining violence against women, harassment and hate crime affecting university students', which published a report titled 'Changing the culture'. The report contains relatively little detail about the gendered dimensions of this culture, or the role of men in transforming it. Indeed, in the years since it was published, while there has been progress at some universities such as policies and procedures being introduced to tackle abuse and support survivors, men's violence against women on campus and the sexism and misogyny that buttresses it remain pervasive. This has been illustrated, for example, by the '#MeToo on campus' movement and by high-profile cases of misogynistic social media conversations among male students becoming public (Haslop and O'Rourke, 2020). Recent NUS (2018) research has also found that 41% of students have experienced some form of sexual misconduct from staff.

There thus remains much need for more engagement with men on campus on ending violence against women. This research sought to shed light on how this can be done effectively with male students, looking in particular at those involved in sport. Research has demonstrated that men's sport is an environment where rigid or 'hyper' expectations of masculinity, encouraging aggression, sexism, and entitlement, can often be influential (Flood and Dyson, 2007). Sport is thus seen as a particularly important space for work to prevent violence against women (Liston et al., 2017). Indeed, men's university sport has been illustrated as a context in which harmful masculine norms connected to 'lad culture' have been able to flourish in England (Jackson and Sundaram, 2020; Phipps and Young, 2013).

Other scholars, such as Anderson and McCormack (2018), have posited that more 'inclusive' forms of masculinity are also developing in some sports contexts. However, this research suggests that young men's attachments to what Hearn (2012) calls the hegemony of men may be more deep rooted and difficult to shift.

This article therefore contends that violence prevention work needs to focus more closely on how men perpetuate – and resist – this hegemony. It is based upon findings from eight focus groups carried out with young men's sports teams at an English university. These discussions were facilitated by videos from a range of prevention campaigns, focusing in particular on intimate partner violence, to gain insights into how such efforts are understood and used by young men. Focus groups provided an opportunity to explore the role that men's peer groups play in shaping how they make sense of violence against women. There is also little research on how men respond to anti-violence 'social marketing' campaigns, itself an important form of prevention work.

Method

The eight focus groups were conducted at a Russell Group (research-intensive) university in England between December 2016 and June 2017. The size of the groups varied from three to nine based on how many members of the sports teams were able and willing to attend, with an average of five participants per session. Sports teams from across the institution were contacted by the author and invited to participate in a study focusing on intimate partner violence prevention campaigns. Only a small minority of these responded; among those that did, team captains played a decisive role in helping to arrange the sessions, and recruiting and bringing along their teammates. In total, 45 young men took part. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the author's departmental ethics committee. All participants gave informed consent before commencing, with sessions lasting 60 to 90 minutes based around a loose topic guide. Discussions focused primarily on the following five prevention campaign videos, shown during the session:

- Home Office: 'This is abuse' (2010),
- Home Office: 'Disrespect nobody' (2016),
- Australian Government: 'Violence against women: Let's stop it at the start' (2016),
- End Violence Against Women (EVAW) Coalition: 'We are man' (2011),
- European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE): 'White Ribbon campaign: On the bus' (2016),¹

These were selected as particularly significant campaigns in the English context and/or examples of unique approaches to violence prevention. The campaigns focused primarily on partner violence, although the EVAW video addressed rape and the EIGE video focused on public sexual harassment. Participants were asked about their views on these, on campaigns they had encountered more broadly, and on what they felt needed to be done to prevent partner abuse and violence against women in society, including men's role in this. The focus groups were audio recorded and manually transcribed before being inductively thematically analysed utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. This included interpreting salient themes within each session, and then drawing thematic connections between each of the focus group discussions. A key area of attention was not merely what participants said, but the group context in which they were expressed, and the interactions and dialogues *between* participants. All data collection and analysis was carried out by the author.

In seeking to emulate homosocial peer settings in the participants' day-to-day lives, I was keen for the group composition to be as 'natural' as possible. Sports teams were ideal in this respect, as pre-existing groups where participants already knew one another. They represented a relatively accessible group of young men, of particular interest given the aforementioned issues about university sport often resembling a hypermasculine environment where violence against women may be more likely to be legitimised.

A range of university sports clubs took part in the study, though most were from team-based contact sports. Participants were aged between 18 and 25, with an average age of 20, taking a variety of subjects across different levels of (mainly undergraduate) study. They were typically from middle-class backgrounds, with common occupational sectors for their parents, including business, finance, medicine, and teaching; 82% of participants defined themselves as White, 7% as Asian, 7% as having a 'mixed' ethnicity, and 4% as Black, with 89% of the young men being of British nationality. The sample was therefore largely made up of students from relatively privileged social positions (broadly reflecting the demographics of the university in question) and should not be seen as representative of young men in England more broadly. However, this fits with the wider ethos of the study to place a spotlight on those with some degree of structural power, to learn more about how that power is maintained. It was agreed that participants would be anonymised beyond the focus groups, and they are referred to using pseudonyms.

As a man conducting research on men's violence against women, I sought to adopt a critically reflexive approach throughout (McCarry, 2007), based upon pro-feminist standpoint epistemology (Pease, 2013). I kept a research diary while conducting the focus groups to facilitate this. Perhaps the biggest challenge to this approach was finding a balance between listening to what the participants had to say and valuing their contributions to the research, while applying a critical lens to their views and avoiding colluding in or leaving unchallenged sexist attitudes or behaviours. Next, the article discusses some of the key themes generated from the focus group data, which shone a light on how young men can both perpetuate and challenge violence against women: building critical consciousness of complicity; defensive responses; the influence of masculine group norms; and expressions of resistance to men's violence.

Young men's views of violence prevention campaigns

It was notable that the participants demonstrated relatively high levels of awareness about intimate partner violence and perceived it to be a serious social problem. Indeed, several were critical of campaigns they had encountered which they felt trivialised the problem, perhaps by adopting a patronising tone towards young people, as if this was necessary to get their attention. This included projecting overly simplistic messages such as merely instructing young people what (not) to do. It was pointed out that this approach risks coming across as lecturing or judgemental and could alienate its target audience. Meanwhile, the young men appeared to appreciate being engaged with in a serious, dialogical way about partner violence as a social issue.

Many participants recognised that partner abuse takes a range of forms beyond physical violence, and that a more subtle pattern of controlling behaviours could be equally harmful. Several felt that while these are hard to portray in a campaign, they are particularly important to build understanding about:

The stuff that maybe you wouldn't think about so much, the stuff to do with like, coercive behaviour, just like little things, is actually more important. Because they're stuff that, if maybe viewed on their own you wouldn't, think was such a big deal, or as stuff that you do need to change about people's behaviour. (Ted)

There was also some understanding that unhealthy, unequal relationship behaviours might be relatively commonplace in society, and that practices normalised among men could be experienced by women as controlling or intimidating, even if not intended as such. However, several participants articulated uncertainty about where the 'boundaries' lie in defining what is unacceptable and abusive behaviour:

They only list a few things, like you can't check people's phones, you can't ask for nude pics, they're not okay, but, where's the line drawn where it is okay kind of thing? Is there anything you're allowed to do on someone's phone, is there any sort of checking up you're allowed to do on a partner, is any of it okay? (Walter)

As a result, many of the participants felt it important for prevention work to address more subtle, everyday harmful practices within young people's relationships. Their comments chimed with critiques of the notion that young men simply do not understand what 'consent' is (Coy et al., 2015), which could be interpreted as reinforcing low expectations of men. Instead, the implication was that consciousness should be raised about how societal norms and expectations can contribute to harmful and oppressive dynamics within sex and relationships – among men more broadly, not only those identified as 'perpetrators'.

Expanding men's critical consciousness of complicity

The young men's responses therefore pointed to the value of prevention efforts working to develop critical consciousness of the range of ways in which men can enact complicity in violence against women (Pease, 2019), as explained by Xavier:

Where, many people might not be able to, relate specifically to issues of domestic violence and that kind of thing, complicitness in kind of attitudes towards women, which might, you know, facilitate that sort of, reasoning into people who do commit these things . . . can strike a bit harder with people who otherwise wouldn't engage with it.

Xavier illustrates that complicity can provide a valuable conceptual lens to understand and relate to how men, and society as a whole, help to perpetuate violence against women – and how all men can play a positive role in preventing it. If men's violence against women consists of a continuum of practices (Kelly, 1988), many of which normalised and socially condoned and built upon deep rooted sexism and misogyny across society, then it is likely that most, if not all, men have engaged in or endorsed behaviours on that continuum at some point. Xavier implicitly acknowledged this when he went on to reflect, 'cause we're all just part of the system really'.

For instance, some participants talked candidly about their involvement in collective sexist and objectifying practices; or at least witnessing them among their peers and staying silent. Connections were sometimes made with how this can be encouraged in masculinised peer environments, such as a darts match:

Some girls came in to watch, and I just felt like the way they were . . . the girlfriend of one of the guys who plays for our team, she was just kind of stood on the edge of the room. I think she knew that if she would've come into the room, she'd have been subjected to something, even if it was just some little joke or something, and she felt quite intimidated in that room, you could tell. (Ugo)

Some of the young men also reflected on their relationships, and how they may have at times behaved in ways which, while not in their eyes abusive, could have been oppressive in some way. There was thus recognition that they might share a degree of complicity in the kinds of unhealthy, unequal practices within sex and relationships that feed into abuse:

Lots of people are probably guilty of slight sort of, mental, domestic abuse, that they wouldn't really, realise. Even this talk has made me think of, stuff that I've said, and been like, actually that could possibly be classed as, domestic abuse if I kept doing it, on a grander scheme. (Dwight)

This quote illustrates how it is not only those who directly use violence and abuse that are involved in reproducing male dominance within sex and relationships. If patriarchal ideas and norms are engrained across society, it is necessary to consider men's conduct within intimate relationships more broadly. Indeed, when considering how gender inequality shapes our (inter)personal lives, making distinctions between 'perpetrators' and 'normal' men may not always be straightforward (Pease, 2019).

The ways in which participants talked about 'grey areas' and ambiguities in sex and relationships sometimes suggested a lack of recognition about the power dynamics and social context in which they take place, which is also missing from the notion that young men simply need to 'learn' consent. For instance, on occasion they appeared to minimise aggressive or controlling behaviours, if they were a 'one off':

A text flashed up on his girlfriend's phone, from a guy, a graphic text, and then he's gone into the phone, and realised that they were actually . . . this was not a random event, this had been happening for ages, and therefore found out. But then again, according to that advert that would technically be, not okay. But then, I don't know . . . if I was in my room, and saw that flash up, and it said, whatever it said, or a picture of, some guy's dick or whatever, I'd be like, okay I'm gonna investigate that a little bit. (Eric)

This example demonstrates the need to address how practices of control and surveillance have become normalised through technologies in young people's relationships and sexual interactions. Meanwhile, in attempting to make sense of and legitimise their own practices, the participants sometimes implicitly constructed mitigations for abusive behaviour:

Where does that controlling aspect come from . . . is it really a power thing, is it trying to exert power over someone? I think in most cases it's probably not a power thing really, I mean it's almost like a fear of losing someone really, and it kind of resulted, to that as well . . . (Fabio)

Fabio went on to describe a situation when he arrived at his girlfriend's house intoxicated, and persistently asked to see her, in a potentially intimidating way. He saw this behaviour as unacceptable, but still attempted to explain it as being motivated by his 'fear of losing her' and because he 'just wanted to see her', which the rest of the group expressed sympathy towards. This illustrates how complicity can be enacted as men attempt to rationalise their own dominating practices, and by extension, those of other men, perhaps influenced by a sense of masculine entitlement to women's attention. This connects with research by Bongiorno et al. (2020) which found that empathy with male perpetrators may be as significant as a lack of empathy for victims, especially among men. For instance, participants also at times reproduced victim-blaming assumptions and myths about violence against women, such as the notion that 'false accusations' by women against men are commonplace.

Defensive responses

A recurring feature within the focus groups was what was interpreted as defensive responses, in which participants quickly dismissed and avoided reflecting on the messages of prevention campaigns (as opposed to more constructive critiques of their content). This defensiveness can take a range of forms, with three main aspects identified: shifting the focus away from men's violence, naturalising the problem, and disassociating from it. While these defensive practices are complex, they can fundamentally be seen as preserving men's complicity, in that they appeared to revolve around the protection of patriarchal norms and privileges when brought into question (Pleasants, 2011). This may not have been deliberate; defensive responses may often represent an unconscious, immediate reaction when taken-for-granted male dominance is made explicit and challenged. However, intentionality does not change their impact, in enabling men to evade contemplating how they might be implicated in patriarchy, or whether they have a responsibility to do something about it. This defensiveness therefore presents serious

obstacles to engaging meaningfully with men about violence against women, and is important for prevention work to anticipate and prepare for.

Shifting the focus

A regular occurrence within the focus groups was the topic of conversation being shifted from men's violence against women to men's victimisation, often quickly after a campaign was shown:

My first thought of that, and I've seen it before and I was thinking that, it's only focused on men, being the perpetrators of domestic violence. Obviously it's probably more common for physical violence to be, carried out by men, but women can just as easily, create the mental sort of stuff, that was going on. (Isaac)

The discussion would also move in this direction in response to stand-alone questions, or pre-emptively near the beginning of the sessions, demonstrating a wider sense of grievance about the issue among several of the young men. The speed and frequency with which the emphasis was often switched suggested a knee-jerk response to being confronted with the realities of violence against women, rather than necessarily always reflecting a genuine concern for male victim-survivors. Shifting focus may have thus enabled deflection from contemplating the issue of men's violence.

Some participants felt men's experiences of partner violence to be a 'hidden' social problem, such as with one of the first comments made in one group:

I'm pretty sure that I've seen some stuff . . . coming up lately about, how everything's aimed at, as was just said . . . male-on-female violence, rather than, the other way round, which does exist . . . while I guess men wouldn't go and report it if they were, cause it's the stigma attached to it. (Zack)

Yet despite this perception of invisibility, men's victimisation often became central to the discussions. There were some particularly detailed conversations about violence perpetrated by women, at times suggesting a degree of fixation with this topic. For instance, in one group, Jonas instigated a lengthy debate by asking:

If there were no repercussions, and it was an environment where no one else saw, so no one else knew what happened, not necessarily you but . . . whether you think, you can't think of any arguments why it wouldn't be okay, if a woman hit you, X hard, do you think that, just because you're a man, you shouldn't be able to hit her back at the exact same level?

It is vital to create opportunities for men and boys to explore their own vulnerabilities (something which can be impermissible within masculine peer groups), including ways in which they can be victims of violence. However, often this issue was raised in a combative way, akin to how men's experiences of abuse can be utilised by 'men's rights' groups as a tool to delegitimise feminist frameworks (Flood et al., 2020). Such perspectives can foster misconceptions which were sometimes vocalised by participants, such as that partner violence is experienced by men and women equally. The

focus groups demonstrated the importance of navigating beyond these deflections. While it is important to recognise that men can also be subjected to partner abuse, shifting the focus often serves to obfuscate and neutralise crucial conversations about men's violence, and take attention away from the gendered dynamics of abuse, which also shape the experiences of male victim-survivors.

Naturalising men's violence

Another recurring theme interpreted as a defensive response was the naturalisation of the problem through the construction of partner violence as a biological inevitability (McCarry and Lombard, 2016). When asked why they thought partner violence is so pervasive, several participants resorted to explanations which emphasised 'natural', biological, or evolutionary differences between women and men, such as physical size and strength, or hormonal tendencies towards aggression in men.

- Daniel: It seems to be, to some extent intrinsic. I mean you look at most things, social issues, and you look at how long they've been social issues, and you can go a long way to reduce the harm, of things like this, but you can never really truly eradicate them.
- Christian: It sounds really horrible to say, but maybe it's, not part of human nature, but maybe just a biological-
- Bruce: Innate sort of-
- Christian: Innate sort of thing. Like you see it all the time . . . animals dominate other animals for particular things . . .

This conversation demonstrates how naturalisation often involves men being taken to represent humanity as a whole, as well as mitigating men's responsibility for violence against women. By viewing violence as to some extent unpreventable, participants also absolved themselves or society of an obligation to do something about it. That is why these naturalising views were interpreted as defensive, because by suggesting that some men will always perpetrate abuse, participants both rationalised such behaviour and separated themselves from those who enact it. It also highlighted a cognitive dissonance, in which partner violence was simultaneously perceived as based upon both coercive control and uncontrollable physical aggression.

In conversations about women's use of violence, participants appeared keener to accentuate the agency of the perpetrator. For example, in the following quote about a video on social media, Robin placed significant emphasis on the woman's actions:

He got into an argument with this girl, and this girl was just punching him, hitting him hitting him hitting him, beating the shit out of him, and then he, just pushed her, and she went through a window, and . . . it really split, opinions.

This connects to how violence by women can often be presented as particularly shocking and fascinating due to its deviation from feminine norms, while men's violence is perceived as normal, 'natural' masculine behaviour, and minimised as a result (Naylor, 2001).

Disassociation from the problem

The final key defensive response interpreted within the focus groups was that of disassociation, in which men detach themselves from violence against women by viewing the problem as one which lies only with those who directly commit it, and has little to do with men more broadly (Burrell, 2020). First, the young men often appeared to perceive partner violence as something with little relevance to their lives, with an implied inconceivability that they or anyone they knew could have anything to do with it:

I don't think any of my friends when we were like, 14 or 15, would do something like the guy was doing to his girlfriend or something, at least to that extreme, you know? (Emilio)

For instance, participants often appeared to view partner violence as a problem for 'adult' relationships in conjugal settings. This was despite several of the campaigns focusing on young people, and participants expressing awareness about sexual violence and 'lad culture' at university. This demonstrates that theoretically understanding a problem does not necessarily result in connecting it to one's own social world, as well as the need for more awareness to be raised about the issue of partner violence at universities.

Second, participants disassociated themselves from the problem by associating partner violence with 'other' men. For example, it was suggested that perpetrators of abuse are somehow inherently deviant, with Barney asserting that 'some people are just scumbags'. Some differentiated their social groups and positions from those of men who commit violence, for example, by claiming that because they were highly educated and attending an elite university, partner violence was something separate from their lives:

I think I can call us educated young men . . . I mean for us, we see these things and we go, yeah, obviously, common sense, don't hit women. So I think we're actually quite fortunate in that we're exposed to this kind of, you know like, moral, sort of thing . . . so we see that and go, yeah obviously. (Liam)

The implication was that prevention campaigns were not really needed for their privileged social group. This illustrates how violence can be othered, through the notion that it is an 'outside' or 'less civilised' group that is the problem (Montoya and Agustín, 2013). For instance, several participants were unable to comprehend that sexual harassment could take place in public on a bus in England, even if they felt it could in 'non-Western' countries, demonstrating how violence against women can be exoticised as a 'cultural' problem, specific to postcolonial societies (Chantler and Gangoli, 2011).

Third, many of the participants distanced themselves from the patriarchal relations that underpin partner violence. Most overtly, this was manifested in denials of gender inequality altogether, which was again sometimes naturalised as if this too has some inescapable basis in human biology, or by simply avoiding it as a topic of discussion. On other occasions, participants downplayed or struggled to see the relevance of gender inequality to partner violence, or to a supposedly 'post-feminist' English society (O'Neill, 2015).

Respect's the key issue, so if they're both respecting each other then . . . there's no reason for that to lead to abuse. Like I say, my grandparents, they did have those [traditional gender] dynamics, and . . . it didn't railroad them into abuse or anything so, well actually, if anything, from my granddad's point of view he's less likely, to be abusive towards, my grandmother, because it's his job, to protect her, not to do that kind of thing. (Barney)

Instances of sexism were often discussed in a reductionist way, in which they were minimised to specific individual incidents deemed unworthy of attention. For example, conversations about phrases like 'don't throw like a girl' became focused on the extent to which they are harmful in particular sports settings, reducing the conversation to the specificities of that single case and divorcing it from its wider context:

In sport, yeah, calling someone a pussy, so what? You called them a pussy, it's a colloquialism . . . it's an informal, throwaway comment. (Dean)

Sometimes participants did recognise the impacts of gender inequalities, but this was typically in broad, abstract ways, disconnected from their own lives. This points to what Bridges and Pascoe (2014) describe as the construction of hybrid masculinities, in which men may overtly recognise gendered injustices, while doing little to actually challenge them. This highlights the need for patriarchy to be made *personal* within prevention work; to develop critical consciousness among men about how it relates to their own varied lives, positions, and practices; and to cultivate a collective sense of ownership for creating change (Watt, 2007).

The influence of collective masculine norms

The reproduction of restrictive, dominating constructions of masculinity is another key aspect of complicity in violence against women. However, as with gender inequality, masculinity was often notably absent from the discussions, with the young men appearing reluctant to relate violence to issues of manhood, or contemplate that men might have a particular role to play in preventing partner abuse. When issues of masculinity were raised, participants sometimes found it difficult to express themselves clearly or grasp how it might connect with the problem. Some did still bring gender norms into the conversation, for example, regarding participants' experiences of oppressive and sexist elements of masculine cultures in university and sports environments, such as punishments received if they lose to a woman at games like pool.

However, perhaps influenced by fears about how the group would respond, these critical reflections were typically made indirectly, and in relation to other men than themselves, focusing on more 'extreme' examples of macho behaviour, typified with the label of 'lad culture'. They appeared to find it harder to openly question their own gendered practices, or consider how less exaggerated expressions of masculinity can also connect to male dominance. This demonstrates how placing attention on 'hyper' forms of masculinity (such as 'lad culture') can sometimes help men to externalise the problem, and position oneself as separate from other men where the problem is deemed to lie, while leaving one's own practices unscrutinised.

The discussions appeared to be shaped substantially by masculine group dynamics in what went said and unsaid. The young men appeared to tentatively 'test' ideas out among one another before pursuing them more freely, and often seemed to be in steered in certain directions by one another, with few dissenting voices. The following conversation, in which aggressive behaviour became normalised as a feature of masculinity, was one example of this:

When you're talking about smashing plates, I've not had, an argument like that before, but that's something I could see myself doing, if I got really pissed off.

Yeah . . .

Really?

Just because I'd . . . I don't think I'd ever take it out on, my partner, but definitely I think I, you know, have a tendency to break things when I do get a bit . . .

Mad, yeah . . .

Get really angry, like-

As a way of alleviating your stress . . .

Exactly, yeah.

In one group, a participant regularly expressed strong anti-feminist, masculinist views, and often dominated the discussion. His peers appeared to be influenced by this, in the language they used, the issues they focused on, and how often they agreed with him:

Dean: What if he turns around and pulls out a gun or something? Or pulls out a knife? Or says right, get outside . . . even if it's fists, what if he goes, alright, we'll have a fight, and we go outside and he kicks your head in? It's not worth getting involved.

Keith: Fair enough it's daytime, and it's a crowded bus, but, if it was at night, a night bus, you're the only three passengers . . .

Dean: Yeah!

Keith: Like myself I probably wouldn't do anything . . .

Dean's repeated claims that too much attention is placed on violence against women and not enough on men's victimisation meant that the group had to constantly acknowledge that anyone could be a victim of abuse. Discussions about issues which did not fit this dynamic, such as men's role in preventing violence, were largely shut down or avoided.

The focus groups thus illustrated the mediating role that men's peer groups (and sometimes, a single dominant group member) can play in shaping how they respond to prevention campaigns, reflecting wider social processes in which collective masculine

expectations can limit what men feel able to express. Participants may have therefore articulated quite different views in one-to-one interviews, where they would not have had to worry about how their peers might respond. Another example of this was how the young men seemed to struggle to articulate empathy with women's experiences. For instance, they sometimes appeared unable to comprehend or believe reports about violence against women, or expressed doubts about its pervasiveness. Several participants questioned how the woman in the EIGE video reacted to the harassment she was subjected to:

She was just sort of like, 'yeah alright'. Whereas I can't really imagine someone doing that, if you're on a crowded bus, and someone starts coming up and touching your face, it's not gonna be: 'okay, could you stop please?' It's gonna be: 'get the hell off me!' (Emilio)

In part, this may reflect a lack of awareness about how people often respond when being subjected to harassment or abuse, out of fear, and self-preservation, for instance. However, it may also point to a reluctance to openly empathise with women's experiences among their peers, for fear that this would defy masculine group norms.

Yet some of the participants were also critical of prevention campaigns utilising normative ideas of masculinity to appeal to men (such as the notion that 'real men don't hit women'; Salter, 2016). Tyler felt that reinforcing gender norms rather than trying to deconstruct them 'probably does more harm than good', given how they feed into partner violence itself. They appeared to feel annoyed that assumptions might be made about them as young men and how to engage with them based on masculine stereotypes. However, others did not have a problem with this approach: 'I'd still say that most men, don't think it's a bad thing, would still, identify with trying to be manly in that sense' (Eric). This demonstrates that prevention campaigns must think carefully about how they represent gender, and the extent to which it is helpful to encourage the idea that men should 'try to be manly', even as a way of gaining their support.

For example, several participants discussed whether they felt they would intervene to stop public sexual harassment. There was sometimes an assumption here that 'bystander intervention' requires a degree of physical stature (i.e. achieving hegemonic standards of masculinity) to be effective:

Yeah they should step up, but if the guy had, if someone attacks them, they're not in the best position to defend themselves, and they're gonna have to rely on other people around them as well, or just, be quite lucky or something like that. And then yeah, I feel like, I'd be more likely to step in, and less afraid of the physical repercussions against me . . . than I expect is the average. (Barney)

The implication was that it is because of their masculinised physical strength that young men should act in such circumstances, rather than because of a commitment to anti-violence and gender equality. Prevention campaigns which emphasise men 'intervening' might therefore risk bolstering their attachments to hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 2005) by encouraging the performance of masculine bravado, and indeed of superiority over women with the notion that men should 'protect' women from other men, rather than acting in solidarity with them (Carlson, 2008).

Expressions of resistance to men's violence

In contrast with the reproduction of complicity, there were also a number of instances in which the young men articulated active resistance to patriarchy and dominant masculine norms. For example, while most participants in Dean's group went along with his anti-feminist assertions, one repeatedly questioned them. This led to tense disagreements between the two:

- Dean: It begs a question of why would you wear something so provocative . . . if you're not looking for some sort of, I don't know, sexual kind of, verification from men or something? [noises of agreement]
- David: But I think raping someone isn't an example of sexual verification . . . regardless of anything, women should be able to wear what they want, I don't think it should be a discussion . . .

These interventions demonstrate the bravery and resilience that can be necessary for young people to challenge their peers about sexist behaviours. It also underscores the contradictions within the focus groups, where participants reinforced legitimisations of violence against women in one conversation and critiqued them in another. These ambiguous positions may reflect cognitive dissonances about gender among many young men in contemporary English society, which have also been found in multi-country survey research (Heilman et al., 2017). While they continue to learn to be men and to see the world through the lenses of patriarchal social institutions from which they derive structural advantages, the social impacts of feminist movements mean many young men also develop some degree of awareness, and sense of injustice, about the oppression of women.

Several participants felt that violence prevention work can play an important role in illuminating alternative ways of looking at the world and galvanising insights and opportunities for creating change, not least on a practical basis, by illustrating how one can go about challenging sexist practices (Carmody, 2013).

The objectification of women is entirely normalised, you're not gonna change that unless you, sit someone down and go, well look . . . this is what you think, is it actually right? Because as a society probably, if it's normalised, you have to challenge it to change it. (Bruce)

Sometimes participants viewed these forms of resistance pessimistically, because even if they disagreed with behaviours among their peers, they were unwilling to defy group norms, or felt that the effects would be minimal. This highlights the significant step required for men to move from opposition to sexism in principle to actively speaking out about it (Carlson, 2008):

- Ugo: It wouldn't make a difference, if I stood there and turned to a group of, lads in the bar and said, nah I'm not gonna do it 'cause it's wrong. They're not all gonna go, yeah god you're right, we'll never do it again, they're all just gonna go-
- Robin: We never saw it that way, yeah.
- Ugo: Exactly, and they know I'm not gonna do it, for that reason.

This cynicism seemed to permit the young men to stay silent, not least by ignoring how several of their peers actually agreed that these behaviours were wrong, and that there might be potential for collective action on this basis.

Yet, there were also occasions in which participants put into practice challenging their teammates. In one group, there was a lengthy discussion about men's experiences of violence being ignored, until another member of the group interjected in a way that shifted the conversation's direction:

This is very egotistical though, I mean there are also many many ways that women are, significantly disadvantaged, to us, here, as white males. (Henry)

While there is no way of knowing the extent to which the participants take action against sexism and misogyny outside the focus groups, it was notable that many did recognise why resisting men's violence against women is so important. It highlights the potential young men have to embrace 'everyday' anti-sexist activism in their lives and to create change within themselves and others. This expands our ability to hold men to account for inaction, because while taking a stand may be difficult, the bar is raised if some of their peers are already doing so.

Discussion

I sought to create a relaxed, safe, and supportive environment within the focus groups to encourage meaningful, open discussion, and the atmosphere was generally respectful, sincere, and friendly. However, participants also highlighted the importance of context, implying that their behaviour might have differed in this more formal environment to elsewhere. Some talked about the benefits of being in a small, single-sex group, which may have helped them explore their experiences with greater depth and honesty.

Nonetheless, there was typically a sense of nervousness when the sessions began, with participants appearing unsure about how to act within a discussion about a topic often perceived as a 'women's issue', where expressing opinions could risk betraying hegemonic norms. They seemed to look to each other to gauge the appropriate way to behave in this masculine context, and what they could say without leaving themselves exposed. This unease usually dissipated as each participant became engaged in the discussion and it became clear that it was acceptable for them to do so. However, at times they still seemed hesitant about coming across like they cared 'too much' about issues like partner violence, highlighting the fragility of the constant struggle to preserve masculine status within men's peer groups.

Notably, participants often expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to take part in the focus groups, pointing out that they had rarely had the chance to meaningfully discuss issues around relationships, gender, and violence prevention previously. While it was difficult to get the young men 'through the door', once a safe, supportive environment had been created they appeared to genuinely value taking part. This demonstrates the importance of creating spaces for conversations on these issues, including through both anti-violence campaigns and more in-depth prevention work, to help young men understand how gender influences their lives, and equip them with the skills to challenge

patriarchal norms and inequalities. It shows the potential that focus groups have as a form of action research, and their value within critical masculinities scholarship, where understanding group dynamics and interactions is pivotal. It is important to recognise, however, that sports teams are a unique and particularly masculinised setting, though this was also a relatively privileged group of young men who may have been skilled in saying 'the right thing'. This highlights the need to conduct more research with diverse groups of men and boys, to continue developing understandings of how they make sense of violence prevention campaigns and programmes.

The focus groups suggested that the perceptions the young men held in relation to violence against women were often conflicted and contradictory. At least superficially, they did at times enact what could be viewed as 'inclusive masculinities' (Anderson and McCormack, 2018), in the seriousness with which they treated intimate partner violence and their willingness to critique social legitimisations of it. However, in many ways, they also reproduced complicity with men's violence and patriarchal relations, or recognised how they had done so in their lives, not least by responding defensively when these power relations were made explicit or questioned.

This demonstrates the limitations of focusing on and problematising (or indeed valorising) particular abstract 'forms' of masculinities (McCarry, 2007). Men can construct and perform different masculinities in different contexts (shaped by factors such as pressure from their peers), and the problem is much greater than specific 'versions' of these. For example, violence against women on university campuses, and complicity in it, is not limited to those young men enacting 'laddish' forms of masculinity, even if these may be hegemonic, not least given that this violence can also be perpetrated by staff, for example. 'Lad culture' can provide a valuable entry point to conversations about masculine norms, but the relative palatability of the concept to the participants may be because it enables attention to be placed 'elsewhere', rather than on men's practices more broadly.

This research thus demonstrates that we need to look critically at the 'hegemony of men' more widely and directly within patriarchal systems (Hearn, 2012); of which a core feature is the ways in which the masculine is defined as superior to the feminine, a hierarchical relation which is then naturalised in ways that make men's violence seem normal and inevitable. Men cannot simply detach themselves from these structures of gendered power, no matter which 'forms' of masculinity they put into practice. However, they can resist them – and the idea that they should adhere to any set of expectations about 'being a man' – in their everyday lives, and this is fundamental to preventing men's violence against women. In addition to complicity, some of the participants enacted this resistance at times within the focus groups, demonstrating the potential that men and boys have to create change in themselves and in wider society.

Acknowledgements

The author is very grateful to all of the young men who gave up their time to take part in this study, and who voluntarily took the step to engage in discussions about preventing men's violence against women. He would also like to thank Professor Nicole Westmarland (Durham University) for her support and guidance with this research, and the Sociological Research Online editors and peer reviewers for their invaluable help in developing the paper.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant numbers 1448235, ES/T006161/1).

ORCID iD

Stephen R Burrell  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2447-0272>

Note

1. The videos are available to watch online: Home Office (2010; <https://youtu.be/RzDr18UYO18>), Home Office (2016; <https://youtu.be/ObvC12uJa6A>), Australian Government (2016; <https://youtu.be/wjBfU-bfGII>), End Violence Against Women (EVAW) Coalition (2011; <https://youtu.be/ZYhaodUPqSU>), and European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2016; <https://youtu.be/SKVWSGvaLds>).

References

- Anderson E and McCormack M (2018) Inclusive masculinity theory: Overview, reflection and refinement. *Journal of Gender Studies* 27(5): 547–561.
- Australian Government (2016) *Respect - Violence against women: Let's stop it at the start*. Available at: <https://youtu.be/wjBfU-bfGII> (accessed 17 May 2021).
- Bongiorno R, Langbroek C, Bain PG, et al. (2020) Why women are blamed for being sexually harassed: The effects of empathy for female victims and male perpetrators. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 44(1): 11–27.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- Bridges T and Pascoe CJ (2014) Hybrid masculinities: New directions in the sociology of men and masculinities. *Sociology Compass* 8(3): 246–258.
- Burrell SR (2018) The contradictory possibilities of engaging men and boys in the prevention of men's violence against women in the UK. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* 2(3): 447–464.
- Burrell SR (2020) Male agents of change and disassociating from the problem in the prevention of violence against women. In: Luyt R and Starck K (eds) *Masculine Power and Gender Equality: Masculinities as Change Agents*. Cham: Springer, pp. 35–54.
- Carlson M (2008) I'd rather go along and be considered a man: Masculinity and bystander intervention. *The Journal of Men's Studies* 16(1): 3–17.
- Carmody M (2013) Young men, sexual ethics and sexual negotiation. *Sociological Research Online* 18(2): 90–102.
- Casey E, Carlson J, Two Bulls S, et al. (2018) Gender transformative approaches to engaging men in gender-based violence prevention: A review and conceptual model. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 19(2): 231–246.
- Chantler K and Gangoli G (2011) Violence against women in minoritised communities: Cultural norm or cultural anomaly? In: Thiara RK, Condon SA and Schröttle M (eds) *Violence Against*

- Women and Ethnicity: Commonalities and Differences across Europe*. Leverkusen: Barbara Budrich, pp. 353–366.
- Connell RW (2005) *Masculinities*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Coy M, Kelly L, Vera-Gray F, et al. (2015) From ‘no means no’ to ‘an enthusiastic yes’: Changing discourse on sexual consent through sex and relationships education. In: Sundaram S and Sauntson H (eds) *Global Perspectives and Key Debates in Sex and Relationships Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 84–99.
- End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW) (2011) *We are man*. Available at: <https://youtu.be/ZYhaodUPqSU> (accessed 17 May 2021).
- European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) (2016) *White Ribbon Campaign: On the bus*. Available at: <https://youtu.be/SKVWSGvaLds> (accessed 17 May 2021).
- Fenton RA and Mott HL (2018) Evaluation of the intervention initiative: A bystander intervention program to prevent violence against women in universities. *Violence and Victims* 33(4): 645–662.
- Flood M (2019) *Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Flood M and Dyson S (2007) Sport, athletes, and violence against women. *No To Violence Journal* 4(3): 37–46.
- Flood M, Dragiewicz M and Pease B (2020) Resistance and backlash to gender equality. *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 56(3): 393–408.
- Haslop C and O’Rourke F (2020) ‘I mean, in my opinion, I have it the worst, because I am white. I am male. I am heterosexual’: Questioning the inclusivity of reconfigured hegemonic masculinities in a UK student online culture. *Information, Communication & Society* 24(8): 1108–1122.
- Hearn J (2012) A multi-faceted power analysis of men’s violence to known women: From hegemonic masculinity to the hegemony of men. *Sociological Review* 60(4): 589–610.
- Heilman B, Barker G and Harrison A (2017) *The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in the US, UK, and Mexico*. Washington, DC: Promundo-US; London: Unilever.
- Home Office (2010) *This is Abuse - Abuse in relationships: Would you stop yourself?* Available at: <https://youtu.be/RzDr18UYO18> (accessed 17 May 2021).
- Home Office (2016) *Disrespect NoBody: Official film*. Available at: <https://youtu.be/ObvC12uJa6A> (accessed 17 May 2021).
- Jackson C and Sundaram V (2020) *Lad Culture in Higher Education: Sexism, Sexual Harassment and Violence*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kelly L (1988) *Surviving Sexual Violence*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Liston R, Mortimer S, Hamilton G, et al. (2017) *A Team Effort: Preventing Violence against Women through Sport*. Melbourne, VIC, Australia: RMIT University and Our Watch.
- McCarry M (2007) Masculinity studies and male violence: Critique or collusion? *Women’s Studies International Forum* 30(5): 404–415.
- McCarry M and Lombard N (2016) Same old story? Children and young people’s continued normalisation of men’s violence against women. *Feminist Review* 112(1): 128–143.
- Montoya C and Agustín LR (2013) The othering of domestic violence: The EU and cultural framings of violence against women. *Social Politics* 20(4): 534–557.
- National Union of Students (NUS) (2010) *Hidden Marks: A Study of Women Students’ Experiences of Harassment, Stalking, Violence and Sexual Assault*. London: NUS.
- National Union of Students (NUS) (2018) *Power in the Academy: Staff Sexual Misconduct in UK Higher Education*. London: NUS.
- Naylor B (2001) Reporting violence in the British print media: Gendered stories. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 40(2): 180–194.

- O'Neill R (2015) Whither critical masculinity studies? Notes on inclusive masculinity theory, postfeminism, and sexual politics. *Men and Masculinities* 18(1): 100–120.
- Pease B (2013) Epistemology, methodology and accountability in researching men's subjectivities and practices. In: Pini B and Pease B (eds) *Men, Masculinities and Methodologies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 39–52.
- Pease B (2019) *Facing Patriarchy: From a Violent Gender Order to a Culture of Peace*. London: Zed Books.
- Phipps A (2017) (Re)theorising laddish masculinities in higher education. *Gender and Education* 29(7): 815–830.
- Phipps A and Young I (2013) *That's What She Said: Women Students' Experiences of 'Lad Culture' in Higher Education*. London: National Union of Students.
- Pleasants RK (2011) Men learning feminism: Protecting privileges through discourses of resistance. *Men and Masculinities* 14(2): 230–250.
- Salter M (2016) 'Real men don't hit women': Constructing masculinity in the prevention of violence against women. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 49(4): 463–479.
- Universities UK (2016) *Changing the Culture: Report of the Universities UK Taskforce Examining Violence against Women, Harassment and Hate Crime Affecting University Students*. London: Universities UK.
- Watt SK (2007) Difficult dialogues, privilege and social justice: Uses of the privileged identity exploration model in student affairs practice. *College Student Affairs Journal* 26(2): 114–126.

Author biography

Stephen R Burrell is an Assistant Professor (Research) in the Department of Sociology at Durham University, UK, where he is a Deputy Director of the Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse (CRiVA). His research focuses on critical studies on men and masculinities, and, in particular, work with men and boys to prevent gender-based violence. He is currently undertaking a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship exploring connections between the climate crisis and masculine violence, and engaging men and boys in building more caring relationships with the environment.

Date submitted 18 May 2021

Date accepted 8 September 2021